

# Abkhazia - An Overlooked European Shore

**A**bkhazia rarely makes headlines. It remains an afterthought in international security discussions, overshadowed by the war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical struggles between the West and Russia. Yet, it is a region that carries profound implications for Georgia, European security, and Russia's expansionist ambitions. The conflict over Abkhazia, like that in Ukraine, is a case study in how Russia destabilizes and dominates its periphery, using military force, economic control, and political manipulation to advance its influence. It is also a story of missed opportunities, irrational political decisions and the indecisiveness of the leaders on all sides of the dividing lines.

Since the early 1990s, Abkhazia has been at the center of a devastating conflict that resulted in the mass displacement of ethnic Georgians. Over 200,000 people—almost half of Abkhazia's pre-war population—were forcibly expelled in an act that meets the criteria of ethnic cleansing – recognized by the OSCE documents and UN resolutions. The

safe and dignified return of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees remains one of the most sensitive political issues in Georgia. Russia's de facto occupation of the region since the 2008 war has made it nearly impossible for the displaced to reclaim their homes, deepening the region's frozen conflict. Furthermore, Russia's dominance in Abkhazia has brought the region under total control of Moscow, raising suspicions that Russia is getting ready to annex it at the time of earliest convenience.

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Abkhazia's strategic significance extends beyond Georgia's borders. The Black Sea basin has become a critical zone of competition between Russia and the West. Abkhazia is one of the territories where Moscow has entrenched its military presence, including a naval base. Russian military bases, intelligence operations, and creeping annexation efforts have effectively turned Abkhazia into a military outpost for the Kremlin. This directly affects NATO's security in the Black Sea and the European Union's broader efforts to stabilize its eastern neighborhood.

Abkhazia's unresolved status has also directly impacted Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. The EU and NATO have hesitated to advance Georgia's membership due to fears that the unresolved territorial conflicts would complicate security guarantees and legal commitments. In effect, Russia has managed to "lock" Georgia's European aspirations through its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is precisely the strategy Moscow at-

tempted and is still attempting in Ukraine with Donetsk, Luhansk, Crimea, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia—using territorial disputes to prevent European integration.

Ignoring Abkhazia comes with a cost. The same tactics Russia perfected in Georgia—military occupation, hybrid warfare, economic manipulation, and political subjugation—are now being applied on a much larger scale in Ukraine. Had the West taken Russia's actions in Abkhazia more seriously in 2008, or before, the world might have been better prepared to counter Moscow's aggression in 2014 and 2022.

## Elections Under the Russian Shadow

The recent de facto presidential elections (first round on February 15, second round on March 1) in Abkhazia showcased Moscow's continued domi-

nance over the region. Badra Gunba, the Kremlin's preferred candidate, [secured](#) 55% of the vote in the second round, defeating opposition leader Adgur Ardzinba. While the election was nominally a contest between local political factions, in reality, it was yet another demonstration of Russia's ability to dictate political outcomes in Abkhazia.

Gunba's victory was ensured through a combination of Russian financial backing, administrative pressure, and direct media influence. The Russian government first [cut](#) the financial aid and electricity supply to Abkhazia and then reinstated them in the final weeks of the campaign—a clear signal that voting for the Kremlin's candidate came with tangible economic benefits. Russian political strategists also played an active role in shaping Gunba's campaign, ensuring his messaging aligned with Moscow's strategic priorities. Russia [opened](#) the Sokhumi airport and launched the first direct flight from Moscow, which incidentally carried Mr. Gunba and a few Abkhaz students studying in Russia on board of the first “historic” Moscow-Sokhumi flight.

However, the election process was not without local anti-Russian resistance. Abkhaz society has demonstrated its ability to push back against Russian economic encroachment. Mass protests in November 2024 [forced](#) previous leader Aslan Bzhania to abandon key Russian-backed economic agreements such as the controversial investment deal that would have allowed Russian citizens to buy property in Abkhazia. Mr. Bzhania [had to resign](#) and pave the way for the early elections which were scheduled for 2025 anyway. These protests reflected a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction with Russia's control, even among those who are not necessarily pro-Georgian. In fact, strangely, most ardent Abkhaz nationalists, who fought and even committed crimes to get Abkhazia's independence from Georgia, have now become situational allies of Georgia in their quest not to see Abkhazia annexed by Russia. After all, they fought

for the independence and if Russia annuls it (as it did with the regions of Ukraine), their efforts would have been in vain.

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Despite the sporadic societal pushbacks, Abkhazia's political process remains firmly under Moscow's control. Both candidates campaigned on being pro-Russian, both strived for attention and meetings with Moscow, both spoke the Russian language and held Russian citizenship, and both candidates considered Abkhazia to be indebted to Russia for recognizing their independence. Moreover, the major pillars of Russian presence and domination – security assistance, military bases, border control, investments, and budgetary support – were unchallenged during the campaign. Not that any candidate had a choice. When anti-Russian sentiments were heard from some opposition figures, Russia swiftly [stripped](#) two prominent local figures of their Russian citizenship, effectively locking them in Abkhazia.

Neither Georgia, nor the West (including the EU), are actors in domestic Abkhaz politics, leaving the Abkhaz at the mercy of the Kremlin and giving a carte blanche to Moscow to toy with the local politicians at its whim. The West and Georgia are generally demonized, and most politicians are often incentivized to stir anti-Georgian rhetoric to feed on the patriotic sentiments of ordinary Abkhaz who often find themselves engulfed in Russian disinformation and a propaganda bubble.

But the 2025 elections offered another interesting lesson, too. Even Georgians, who have their problems with elections and state capture by the oli-



garch, need to acknowledge that there is a certain degree of peculiar popular democracy in Abkhazia where power has changed hands several times in the last two decades through elections and popular unrest. The previous leader, Aslan Bzhania, was ousted in November 2024 as a result of pressure from the public over the agreements pushed by Russia. Bzhania himself came to power in 2020 when a public uprising [ousted](#) his predecessor – Raul Khajimba in 2019. Khajimba in turn was elected in 2014 after a coup earlier in 2014 [overthrew](#) his predecessor Alexander Ankvab. Yes, Abkhaz elections are often criticized as having many irregularities, including vote-buying and the use of administrative resources. Yes, ethnic Georgians in the Gali region (constituting at least a quarter of the total population) are not allowed to vote and those who have been massively expelled since the 1990s are unable to return. Yes, there are no international observers, except for Russia-paid Moscow-centric European lower-grade politicians. But still, whatever elections are held, they still more or less represent the will of the Abkhazia residents, albeit with the heavy Russian involvement in the process.

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The major lesson is clear: while Abkhaz society retains a degree of agency, Moscow still holds the levers of power. Whenever its political influence is threatened, Russia intervenes—whether through financial pressure, political manipulation, or media campaigns. It has not yet used force but if the need arises, especially once/when the issue of Abkhaz annexation becomes part of Moscow’s agenda, nothing can be overruled. The Abkhaz have watched cautiously and with disdain how the

“independence” of eastern Ukrainian regions – the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) evaporated with a simple signature of Mr. Putin.

## **Abkhazia’s “Lottery” of Recognition: A Prize of Russian Control**

In 2008, Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia was framed as a significant diplomatic victory for the breakaway region. After a five-day war which Russia waged against Georgia, preceded by a series of steps aimed at legitimizing the Abkhaz authorities in response to Kosovo’s recognition by the West, Moscow recognized Abkhazia’s independence on 26 August 2008. Initially, Russia tried to increase the number of recognitions through political allies, petty bribing of third world leaders, and diplomatic pressure but it succeeded only with Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. However, Georgia’s non-recognition counter-strategy with the support of the Western partners reversed the recognitions of [Vanuatu](#) and [Tuvalu](#) and prevented other African, Latin American and Oceania countries from pursuing the Russian agenda. Only Syria’s Assad regime [recognized](#) Abkhazia and with the new government in Damascus, even that hangs by a thread.

The question is, what has Abkhazia truly won since that recognition in 2008? If before, the European leaders, like Javier Solana, then the High Representative of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and Walter Steinmeier, then Germany’s Foreign Minister, visited Abkhazia and the level of engagement from the Western leaders was high, now the contacts are minimal and Abkhazia has completely disappeared from the Western agenda. In reality, Abkhazia’s independence recognition came with a price – complete economic and political dependence on Moscow.

For the past 17 years, Abkhazia’s so-called inde-

pendence has been an illusion, well sold by the local political elites, but in reality, it has made Abkhazia more susceptible to being swallowed by Russia. Russia currently fully controls its borders, its military, and its economy. The region's budget is almost 80% subsidized by Russian financial aid. Russian military bases and FSB officers oversee security, limiting Abkhazia's ability to act autonomously, including on "border" crossing.

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Russia's gradual digesting of Abkhazia has unfolded in carefully orchestrated stages, each reinforcing Moscow's grip on the region's economy, security, and political institutions. The turning point came in 2014 when Russia's annexation of Crimea signaled a more aggressive approach to consolidating its control over occupied territories. That same year, the Kremlin pushed through the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership with Abkhazia, [forcing](#) its de facto authorities to accept deeper integration into Russian legal and security structures. Despite public resistance, including opposition from the de facto parliament and civil society, Russia used financial blackmail to impose the agreement. It marked a significant step toward annexation, cementing Russian dominance over Abkhazia's defense and customs infrastructure.

Russia's encroachment became even more explicit with the de facto [annexation](#) of Aibga, a small village in Abkhazia's Gagra district. Moscow unilaterally added Aibga to its cadastral register in 2009, triggering protests from Sokhumi which insisted that the village remained within Abkhaz borders. Despite political pushback and public opposition, Russia formally incorporated Aibga into Krasnodar's jurisdiction in 2021. The annexation exposed

the power imbalance between Moscow and Sokhumi—Abkhazia's leaders could object but they were powerless to stop Russia from redrawing the map.

Beyond territorial expansion, Moscow has aggressively pursued economic and legal harmonization, further binding Abkhazia to its economy and legal space. The 2020 Program for the Formation of a Single Socio-Economic Space [mandated](#) that Abkhazia align its laws with Russian legislation in nearly every sector. The agreement dictated changes to citizenship laws, customs regulations, and even NGO operations, ensuring that Abkhazia would function as an extension of Russia's legal system. While the de facto authorities initially resisted allowing Russian citizens to buy land, Moscow continued to [pressure](#) Sokhumi to open the real estate market, a move that would dramatically shift the demographic balance in favor of the Russians. So far, the Abkhaz have been resisting this change but now with the election of Moscow's favorite as the de facto president, it is expected that the pressure to allow Russian investments in the real estate sector, including the purchase of property, will dramatically increase.

Perhaps the most blatant act of Russian appropriation was the seizure of the Bichvinta (Pitsunda) residence. The dacha, a former Soviet government retreat on prime coastal land, had long been under informal Russian control but in 2022, Moscow [moved](#) to formalize its ownership. The de facto parliament resisted ratifying the agreement, fearing a public backlash, but Russia escalated its pressure. Eventually, Abkhaz lawmakers were forced to ratify the deal under duress, despite mass protests and clear public opposition.

Energy dependence has been another crucial tool of control. Abkhazia relies on Georgia's Enguri hydroelectric plant for electricity but its growing demand, uncontrolled crypto-mining and lack of infrastructure have created a crisis. Russia has exploited this situation to push for the privatization

of Abkhazia's energy sector, ensuring that Russian companies would take over critical infrastructure. When the de facto government tried to resist, Moscow used financial blackmail, demanding that Sokhumi pay nearly USD 10 million for Russian electricity imports—an amount Abkhazia could barely afford. The ultimatum left the de facto government scrambling, proving that Russia could [manipulate](#) the energy crisis to extract political concessions.

Moscow has also moved to suppress independent civil society and media in Abkhazia, fearing that NGOs could become a source of resistance. The Kremlin's model—already deployed in Russia and even Georgia—was to push Abkhazia to adopt a “foreign agent” law that would brand independent organizations as tools of Western influence. Although local activists and some de facto officials resisted, Russia continued to pressure Sokhumi to restrict foreign-funded NGOs. Until today, Abkhaz [resistance](#) has yielded results and the foreign agents law still remains to be passed.

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Beyond economic and political influence, Russia has expanded its military footprint in Abkhazia, reinforcing its position in the Black Sea. In 2023, Moscow secured the restoration of Sokhumi's Bapushera Airport, which started operating under Russian control for 49 years this year, likely serving dual civilian and military purposes. Additionally, the Kremlin [announced](#) the construction of a new naval base in Ochamchire, providing Russia with a strategic outpost that could be used to counter NATO's presence in the Black Sea and protect its maritime interests. These military expansions make it clear that Russia does not view Abkhazia merely as a protectorate but as a critical asset in

its broader positioning on the Black Sea.

Despite moments of local resistance, Abkhazia's dependence on Moscow—economically, politically, and militarily—has made opposition futile. Russia's creeping annexation has followed a pattern: economic coercion, legal harmonization, territorial absorption, and military entrenchment. The ultimate question is not whether Abkhazia will be annexed but when and how Russia will decide to formalize its control. Moscow has already laid the groundwork for full integration and unless decisive actions are taken by local forces, who despise the idea of “losing independence,” as well as Georgia and the West, the annexation of Abkhazia may only be a matter of time.

## Lessons from Russian Domination in Abkhazia

Over two decades of Russian domination in Abkhazia offers several key lessons for both Georgia and Europe. Local political elites could also exploit these lessons to benefit the Abkhaz population.

1. *Russia's Hybrid Warfare Playbook Remains the Same*

***What Russia did to Georgia in the 1990s and 2008, it has done on a larger scale to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The West should have learned from Abkhazia's case that Moscow's strategy relies on gradually absorbing territories through military occupation, economic entrapment, and political manipulation.***

What Russia did to Georgia in the 1990s and 2008, it has done on a larger scale to Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The West should have learned from Abkhazia's case that Moscow's strategy relies on gradually absorbing territories through military

occupation, economic entrapment, and political manipulation. Abkhazia remains a cautionary tale of what happens when the West ignores Russian expansionism. Moreover, countering Russia's disinformation, hybrid threats and even soft power matters, where possible.

In Abkhazia, the West, as well as Georgia, is portrayed as an enemy, even though in reality there are no military or belligerent objectives towards Abkhazia and the Abkhaz, either in Tbilisi or indeed in the Western capitals. Nevertheless, even independent media in Abkhazia often picks up anti-Georgian and anti-Western stories to strengthen the already present narrative of the West undermining Russian influence and Georgia being the servant of George Soros and aggressive Western liberals.

## 2. Western Engagement Matters

The West currently is not an actor in Abkhazia. The limited number of international partners, including the UN family in Abkhazia, is not a counterbalance to the ubiquitous presence of Russia. Russia outspends the EU and Georgia (combined) in Abkhazia 10-to-1. Most Russian money goes directly into the people's pockets, through salaries, pensions, or social projects while many goods offered by the EU, the U.S., or Georgia are intangible and not easily accessible.

In reality, people in Abkhazia want the same things as elsewhere in the world. They would love to have access to European education, travel freely around Europe, and have the same economic and financial opportunities as other Europeans have. However, a decades-long conflict has left a mark on the simple things that matter in everyday life. For instance, the Abkhaz cannot travel because their documents (for obvious reasons) are not recognized and they only have Russian passports. Currently, when Russian citizens are facing many restrictions because of Putin's war in Ukraine, the Abkhaz are placed in

the same category. So far, no one has found a status-neutral solution to open Europe for Abkhazia residents to travel.

Similarly, because of the non-recognition of education-related certificates and diplomas, the only place the Abkhaz can legitimately continue their education is Russia. However, in reality, if the EU could open its education system for Abkhazia's residents, many Abkhaz children and students would choose the European education system over the Russian one.

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The protests in 2024 showed that Russian dominance in Abkhazia is not absolute. Russia would have had less leverage if there had been an alternative for the Abkhaz regarding financial, economic, or diplomatic/political support. This reinforces the need for a more proactive European strategy towards the contested regions, whether Abkhazia or elsewhere on the European continent. It is harder to counter Russian influence where Europe and the West have little reach. Hence the lesson – increase the reach.

## 3. Democratic Backsliding in Georgia Weakens Its Position

Georgia's current political trajectory—marked by democratic backsliding and anti-Western rhetoric—undermines its position as a credible alternative for Abkhazia. Georgia cannot realistically compete with Russia's influence in the occupied region without a clear and committed European path. The Abkhaz already feel dominated by Moscow and some are even sick and tired from contin-



uous instructions and blackmail from the Kremlin. Mending bridges with another Moscow client gives nothing to Sokhumi. It can deal with Moscow without Tbilisi. Where Georgia could be more helpful is if it projects the European soft power and the benefits the EU can offer to the Abkhaz population. But since Georgia is negating the European path and opting for Moscow's orbit, its attractiveness for the Abkhaz decreases significantly.

#### 4. There is No Peace Process Currently in Place

Because the conflict has been frozen for almost 30 years, there is currently no peace process between Georgia and Russia related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Geneva International Discussions, while an interesting all-inclusive format with the participation of the EU, the U.S., Russia, the UN, the OSCE, Georgia, and Abkhaz and Ossetian representatives, lacks status, interest and a level of involvement. Its agenda is limited to discussing the highly politicized issues of the non-use of force and international security arrangements, as well as humanitarian issues, including the return of displaced persons. There is no possibility for compromise on these issues as all participants have learned their talking points and see no interest in moving forward. A reinvigoration of the peace process through the higher-level engagement from the West could stimulate the parties to become more creative, especially since some benefits of European integration become accessible due to these talks. Additionally, embracing status-neutral solutions, be they foreign education, freedom of movement, or trade relations, learning from other European conflicts, such as Cyprus (or even Kosovo), could be helpful. The current approach of staying dug into the diplomatic trenches creates

only a mutually unacceptable but comfortable status-quo.

#### 5. Annexation is a Threat that No One Except Moscow Wants

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Paradoxically, even the most ardent Abkhaz nationalists, who support the Russian war in Ukraine, would agree with the nationalist Georgians and the internationalist Europeans who oppose the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that the annexation of Abkhazia by Russia is unacceptable. This is not to say that the intersection of interests might spill over into other areas of mutual interest; however, on non-annexation there is a tacit agreement. This opens a small room of opportunity to find mutually beneficial areas which could strengthen the resistance of the local community in Abkhazia to looming Russian annexation. Paradoxically, again, strengthening Abkhaz institutions, a non-starter for many Georgian politicians for decades, could now be an answer to the Russian annexation threat. The reality is that if Russia decides to move with the annexation without military means, the only force that can resist it is the local Abkhaz establishment ■